



National Assessment Governing Board

National Assessment of Educational Progress

**Testimony of Charles E. Smith
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**Before the
Senate Subcommittee on
Education and Early Childhood Development
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions**

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Chairman Alexander and Members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the American History Achievement Act.

I am Charles E. Smith, Executive Director of the National Assessment Governing Board. The Governing Board was created in legislation introduced in 1988 by Senator Kennedy, developed to reauthorize the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The legislation also provided for the first-ever state-by-state NAEP results and for standards-based reporting by NAEP. Senator Kennedy's bill implemented recommendations made in 1987 by a national study group charged with improving NAEP's usefulness. The study group, comprised of highly respected leaders in education, was chaired by then Tennessee governor Lamar Alexander. One of the members of the study group was the First Lady of Arkansas at the time, Hillary Rodham Clinton.

It is with a profound sense of appreciation for your and Senator Kennedy's continuing support for NAEP's role in providing information useful to educators and policymakers, that I appear before you today.

Mr. Chairman, you have asked that my testimony address the provisions of S. 860—the American History Achievement Act—and results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress in U.S. history and civics. I will provide selected NAEP results first. The Findings section of the American History Achievement Act already includes a listing of data drawn from the 2001 U.S. history assessment and I will augment those results. The remainder of my testimony will address the provisions of S. 860.

NAEP Results in U.S. History and Civics

Recent events remind us that our ability to survive as a nation depends on our belief in the value of our purposes as a nation. Schools are the primary means for transmitting these purposes to each new generation—through instruction in U.S. history and civics. It is essential that students leave school with a deep understanding of the ideas, traditions, and democratic values that bind us with our fellow citizens and that serve as a compass that guides our societal and individual decisions.

Likewise, it is essential to shine a light on the outcomes of teaching and learning in U.S. history and civics and on successful or promising instructional practices. Mr. Chairman, you and the subcommittee are to be commended for the light that will be shined on these topics by conducting this important hearing today.

Achievement in U.S. History

The NAEP results in U.S. history for 1994 and 2001 and in civics for 1998 present a somewhat mixed but troubling portrait of student achievement in these subjects. The NAEP achievement results listed in the Findings section of the American History Achievement Act indicate that U.S. students have significant deficiencies in the knowledge of our nation's history. Of particular concern is the finding from the 2001 U.S. history assessment that 57 percent of 12th graders scored below the Basic level in U.S. history and that this was unchanged from the 1994 assessment.

There are three achievement levels reported by NAEP: Basic, Proficient, and Advanced. The Basic level represents partial mastery of the knowledge and skills prerequisite for the Proficient level. The Proficient level denotes competency over challenging subject matter. The Advanced level signifies superior performance.

The results in U.S. history in 2001 by achievement level and grade are displayed in Table 1:

Table 1.
Percentage at Achievement Levels by Grade
NAEP U.S. History Assessment 2001*

	Below Basic	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
Grade 4	33	49	16	2
Grade 8	36	48	15	2
Grade 12	57	32	10	1

*Totals by grade may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Please note that, as the student grade level increases, the percentage below Basic increases and the percentage at Proficient decreases. At 4th grade, 33 percent are below Basic; at 8th grade, 36 percent; and at 12th grade, 57 percent. At the Proficient level, the percentages are 16, 15, and 10, respectively, for 4th, 8th, and 12th grade.

To illustrate the meaning of these results, please consider what it means for 57 percent of 12th graders not to have reached the Basic level on the U.S. history assessment. At the Basic level in U.S. history at the 12th grade, student responses indicate the ability to:

- identify the significance of many people, places, events, dates, ideas, and documents in U.S. history
- recognize the importance of unity and diversity in our social and cultural history
- understand America's changing relationships with the rest of the world
- relate relevant experience from the past in understanding contemporary issues
- understand the role of evidence in making an historical argument

This means that the majority of 12th graders did not know, for example: (1) that the Monroe Doctrine expressed opposition to European colonization in the Americas at the early part of the 19th century; (2) how government spending during the Great Depression affected the economy; and (3) that the Soviet Union was an ally of the U.S. in World War II.

However, there were some positive signs in the NAEP results. The average score of 4th graders increased from 205 to 209 and of 8th graders from 259 to 262 between 1994 and 2001. The gains for 4th graders between 1994 and 2001 were for the lowest performing students, that is, those at the 10th and 25th percentiles. At 8th grade, gains were found for students at the 25th, 75th and 90th percentiles. However, at the 12th grade, there were no differences in achievement between 1994 and 2001 at any point along the performance distribution.

Other positive signs were in the narrowing of differences in average score by race/ethnicity. At the 4th grade there was a 7 point narrowing of the average score between white and African-

American students between 1994 and 2001. At the 12th grade there was a 7 point narrowing of the average score between white and Hispanic students. But at the 8th grade, the achievement gap between these groups was unchanged.

Although the narrowing of average score differences between minority and non-minority student demographic groups is positive, the differences when looking at the percentage below Basic in 2001 are stark and worrisome.

Table 2.
Percentage of Students Below Basic by Grade and Race
NAEP U.S. History Assessment 2001

	White	African American	Hispanic	Native American	Asian/Pacific Islander
Grade 4	21	56	58	47	29
Grade 8	25	62	60	50	32
Grade 12	51	80	74	66	47

There are important observations to share about the data in Table 2. First, at grades 4 and 8, the percentage below Basic is much higher in general for minority students than for white students, and twice as high or more for African American, Hispanic, and Native American students than for white students. As with the overall results displayed in Table 1, the percentage below Basic increases as the grade increases for each respective group. At grade 12, the percentage below Basic for any group should be viewed as unacceptable, but the results for African American, Hispanic, and Native American students, respectively, at 80 percent, 74 percent, and 66 percent below Basic should be viewed as devastating.

Achievement in Civics

I will now turn to the NAEP civics results. The results from the civics assessment in 1998 also indicate that improvement is needed. About these findings, the well-known scholar R. Freeman Butts observed, "These findings are...disturbing...for our citizenship itself is at stake."

Table 3.
Percentage of Students at Achievement Levels by Grade
NAEP Civics Assessment 1998*

	Below Basic	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
Grade 4	31	46	21	2
Grade 8	30	48	21	2
Grade 12	35	39	22	4

*Totals by grade may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Although the percentage below Basic in civics is lower than in U.S. history at all three grades, and the percentage at proficient is higher, the results of the 1998 civics assessment are still troubling.

It is important to point out that 35 percent of 12th graders did not reach the NAEP Basic level and that the percentage below Basic is higher at the 12th grade than at the 4th or 8th grade. These young citizens, approaching or at voting age, do not demonstrate an understanding of the principles of American government, its structure of checks and balances, and the roles of political parties and interest groups in our democracy. Students at or above the NAEP Proficient level in civics have a good understanding of how governments and constitutions work and the ability to apply what they've learned to concrete situations. However, it is worrisome that only 26 percent of 12th graders were at or above the Proficient level.

At the Basic level in civics at the 12th grade, student responses indicate:

- understanding that constitutional government can take many forms
- knowledge of the fundamental principles of American constitutional government and politics
- familiarity with both rights and responsibilities in a democratic society
- recognition of the value of political participation

This means that 35 percent of 12th graders in 1998, for example, (1) could not list two ways in which the American system of government is designed to prevent absolutism and arbitrary power; (2) did not know that the President and the State Department have more authority over foreign policy than either Congress or the courts; and (3) did not know that the Supreme Court used the 14th Amendment to the Constitution to invalidate state laws that segregate public schools.

As with U.S. history, the results show, generally, that the percentage below Basic increases as students progress through the grades and that much larger percentages of minority students are below Basic than white students. At all three grades, differences in the percentage below Basic between white students and African American, Hispanic, and Native American students are more than two to one.

Table 4.
Percentage of Students Below Basic by Grade and Race
NAEP Civics Assessment 1998

	White	African American	Hispanic	Native American	Asian/Pacific Islander
Grade 4	21	52	57	46	29
Grade 8	20	50	55	51	29
Grade 12	27	58	56	56	34

Finding 3 of the American History Achievement Act states that

“America’s past encompasses great leaders and great ideas that contribute to our shared heritage and to the principles of freedom, equality, justice, and opportunity for all.”

Mr. Chairman, the data cited above raise serious questions about how well these noble principles are being transmitted to and absorbed by rising generations of young adults. The disparate

performance between minority and non-minority students in U.S. history and in civics is egregious and poses challenges to our nation's progress in achieving those very principles. Aristotle said, "If liberty and equality...are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost." Are not the chances of all our citizens sharing equally in government lessened if the knowledge about the core principles and history of that government is unequal?

The American History Achievement Act

The American History Achievement Act consists of amendments to the current authorizing legislation for the National Assessment of Educational Progress. It amends the authorizing legislation by:

- (1) calling for assessments in history at least once every four years;
- (2) authorizing trial state assessments in U.S. history and civics in grades 8 and 12, with priority given to conducting assessments in U.S. history;
- (3) assigning the National Assessment Governing Board the responsibility for identifying and selecting participating states, in consultation with the Commissioner for Education Statistics;
- (4) authorizing appropriations for these purposes for NAEP operations and the Governing Board.

Schedule of U.S. History and Civics Assessments

The current NAEP legislation makes the Governing Board responsible for determining the schedule of subjects and grades to be assessed by NAEP. The Governing Board maintains a schedule of assessments with a minimum 10-year outlook to allow advance notice to NAEP participants and sufficient time to plan for NAEP operations.

I am pleased to report that the Governing Board, just a few weeks ago at its quarterly meeting of May 19-21, 2005, adopted a schedule of assessments that provides for the assessment of U.S. history and civics once every four years. The newly adopted assessment schedule revises and extends the current schedule through the year 2017.

U.S. history and civics assessments in grades 4, 8, and 12 at the national level were already scheduled for 2006. Under the new schedule, assessments in U.S. history and civics in grades 4, 8, and 12 at the national level will also be conducted in 2010 and 2014. In addition to monitoring progress within grades over time, the once every four-year schedule provides the added advantage of aligning with the cohort progression from grades 4 to 8 and grades 8 to 12. These assessments will continue a trend line of assessments in U.S. history conducted in 1994 and 2001. In civics, these assessments will continue a trend line with a base year of 1998.

Trial State Assessments in Grades 8 and 12

The American History Achievement Act provides for the conduct of trial state assessments in at least 10 states that are geographically diverse. Because a number of prerequisite steps are required to be carried out in the year before a state level assessment is conducted, funding must be provided both in the year before and the year of the assessment. These prerequisite steps

include identification of participating states, drawing the sample of schools and students, working directly with the schools to provide an orientation to the assessment, and printing test booklets.

In contrast to the requirement under Title I that states receiving funding must participate in NAEP reading and mathematics assessments in grades 4 and 8 every two years, state participation in NAEP U.S. history and civics assessments at grades 8 and 12 would be voluntary. Eliciting voluntary state participation at grade 12 would pose new challenges for NAEP that will be discussed in detail below.

The American History Achievement Act provides that only grades 8 and 12 will be assessed at the state level. This appears to recognize that significant variation exists from state-to-state in U.S. history and civics curricula by grade 4, making this grade less appropriate as an object of state level assessment. On the other hand, by grades 8 and 12, it is likely that students have been exposed to instruction in U.S. history and civics. These grades are also important for assessment purposes because they represent important transition points in schooling in the U.S. Grade 8 generally represents the transition point to high school, and grade 12 marks the end of K-12 schooling in the U.S. and the transition point to adult pursuits—college, training for employment, and entrance into the military.

While grades 8 and 12 are important points in American education, NAEP's experience at the state level at the respective grades is vastly different. From 1990 to 2002, state level participation in NAEP was strictly voluntary, was limited to grades 4 and 8, and involved only the subjects of reading, mathematics, science, and writing. Mandatory state level participation in grades 4 and 8 in reading and mathematics became a legislated requirement in 2003 under Title I. State level participation in science and writing assessments at grades 4 and 8 remains voluntary. Voluntary state level participation at grades 4 and 8 from 1990 to the present across the four subjects offered has been solid, generally reaching between 40 and 44 states per assessment.

Therefore, there is reason to believe that, with adequate notice, appropriate outreach, and targeted follow up, achieving the voluntary participation of 10 states at grade 8 is a reasonable goal. However, in contrast to NAEP's fifteen-year experience eliciting participation for state-level assessments at grades 4 and 8, NAEP has never conducted state level assessments at grade 12. We know that, at the national level, obtaining the cooperation of high schools to participate in 12th grade NAEP is more challenging than at grades 4 and 8, and that participation rates are much lower at grade 12 than at grades 4 and 8.

Mr. Chairman, the Governing Board's primary role is to oversee and set policy for NAEP, in accordance with legislative guidance. I want to assure you that, upon enactment of the American History Achievement Act and provision of appropriations that are sufficient and timely, the Governing Board will commit to doing its utmost to elicit the voluntary participation of 10 states in assessments of U.S. history and civics at grade 8 and at grade 12.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, it is commendable that you and Senator Kennedy have introduced the American History Achievement Act and that you are conducting this hearing. As the bill so eloquently states: "...the strength of American democracy and our standing in the world depend on ensuring that our children have a strong understanding of our Nation's past."

Regrettably, the NAEP results, especially at the 12th grade and by race/ethnicity, give cause for concern about the state of knowledge of American students about U.S. history and civics. We ignore at our own peril the implications of these results for our nation's future.

Drawing from her remarks about the NAEP U.S. history and civics results, I would like to close with these quotes made by former Governing Board member Diane Ravitch: "Preparing our youth to be responsible members of a democratic society is one of the most important missions of American education." "Our ability to defend—thoughtfully and intelligently—what we as a nation hold dear depends on our knowledge and understanding of what we hold dear." "We cannot be content when so many...are so poorly prepared."